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2004 Legislative Wrap-Up

Dear Friends,

The 2004 legislative session has recently come to a close, and I am happy to be back at work teaching in the Federal Way School District.

Despite a short sixty-days, the Legislature can be proud of a very successful session in which we passed a supplemental budget that not only provides relief for our businesses but also support for our most important asset – our people.

First, I would like to thank all of you who responded to my survey. Your guidance plays an important role in how effectively I represent you in the Legislature. The results show that you want lawmakers to ensure that good-paying jobs are available, that your children receive an affordable and first-class education, and that your families are well taken care of with accessible health care.

I believe the House of Representatives answered the call. We had some great successes; unfortunately, in many cases the House faced setbacks in the Senate where many important pieces of legislation did not pass. Nevertheless, House Democrats will remain committed to improving the economy as I said, not just for business but for all of us in Washington.

Sincerely,

Mark Miloscia

PRIMARY UPDATE:

I am very disappointed the Governor decided to amend the Primary bill by vetoing the "Top-Two" section, leaving us with the "Montana" style primary process. Citizens must now choose a specific party's ballot rather than voting for any candidate regardless of party affiliation. That means come September, you must pick a Democrat, Republican, or Libertarian ballot only, and only vote for candidates from that party.

Fortunately, your choice will remain private — your party affiliation will not be shared with the parties themselves. However, I still believe the power should reside with the people rather than the parties, and the Top-Two system was our best chance to guarantee that.

State Rep. Mark Miloscia



Creating and Protecting Washington Jobs

The session began with the Legislature quickly passing the extension for R&D tax exemptions. This legislation also grants a sales tax deferral to research facilities built by universities and eliminates the B&O tax on federal research grants to small businesses.

Some may argue that \$59 million for tax exemptions could help us keep our commitment to our state's needy children and families. While I agree, I also think that sometimes the best assistance we can provide is added opportunities. Tax exemptions attract industries with good-paying jobs, creating greater revenue streams to Washington. Statistics clearly show that when the economy struggles and jobs are lost, poverty rises along with crime and health problems.

However, I believe there must be accountability built in to any tax exemptions the state offers to businesses. That's why I voted for HB 1869, which will assess whether or not taxpayers are benefiting from tax incentives for businesses. Some exemptions have been on the books for so long we're not even sure what purpose they serve and what effect they are having. It's time to find out if we're getting our money's worth. We expect and deserve accountability from our government – this is one way to get it.

Fulfilling Our Commitment to Our Students

Jobs won't matter unless we have a world-class education system. We must provide greater access and funding for both K-12 and higher education in Washington to ensure that new business development and innovation continue to generate economic growth in the future.

Some of the key pieces of legislation to pass this year help schools and students achieve the level of education necessary to compete and succeed in a global economy.



We accomplished great reforms for K-12 Education by allowing retakes of the WASL for students and increased levy capacities for school districts.

We also gave our colleges and universities an additional \$10 million and increased financial aid for college students by \$7 million so our students can receive the quality education they need to land jobs in the 21st century.

I am disappointed there was no teacher pay raise included in the final supplemental budget, nor additional funding to reduce class size. While the Legislature did allocate funding to reduce health care premiums for school employees, I am still committed to fully funding the two initiatives, 728 and 732, and providing the best possible learning environment for our children.

- \$10 million in the budget to pay for 3,000 more enrollments at our colleges and universities.
- \$7 million in enrollments so more students can earn degrees in high-demand fields like nursing, computer science, and bio-tech.
- \$4.3 million in the budget for more Promise Scholarships so students afford to attend college.

The Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) is tasked with developing a statewide strategic master plan that ensures our system of higher education has a clear vision of goals and a plan to meet them. A legislative work group, of which I am a member, will provide policy direction for the strategic plan.

Healthy Communities

This session I served as Vice-Chair of the House Democratic CARES Task Force, which stands for Compassion, Accountability, Reform, and Economic Security. With these goals in mind, we made sure the Legislature would not leave those most affected by our economic downturn behind – the families that go without the care, services, and even food they need, and especially the children that often bear the largest burden when times are tough.



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Recognizing the importance of a healthy body as well as mind, the Legislature passed the 2004 Act for Hungry Families. This new legislation will require more school lunches for low-income kids and greater food stamp eligibility for needy families. The ramifications of this legislation sadly won't make any headlines, but will make a huge difference in the lives of many struggling children and elderly in our state.

Even in a state with one of the highest percentages of per capita incomes, Washington ranks a dismal fifth highest in hunger. Despite the money allocated for K-12 and Higher Education this year, how do we expect our children to succeed if they can't focus on their school-work?



Tax Relief for Seniors

On a fixed-income, many of our state's senior citizens often find it hard to make ends meet. They should not be forced out of their homes because they cannot afford rising property taxes. Fortunately, the Legislature was able to expand senior property-tax relief to retirees with household incomes up to \$35,000. This legislation is the first expansion of senior property-tax relief in Washington state since 1998, when the current \$30,000 eligibility ceiling was enacted.

While these were great accomplishments for the Legislature as a whole, I

found personal reward in helping some key pieces of legislation pass this year. I advocated for increased funding for family support and high school transition for persons with developmental disabilities. I also helped promote the extension of funding for the Internet Academy in Federal Way. The Internet Academy provides innovative uses of technology, customized learning environments and access to certified teachers and school curricula. The Academy is leading the way for students to attain an education beyond the physical limits of a classroom. I was happy to see both of these items included in the final supplemental budget.



Lowering Prescription Drug Costs

In our state, consumers pay two or three times the price for the same medication they can buy in Canada. Almost 80% of my survey respondents believe that Washington citizens should have the right to purchase needed prescription drugs from Canada.

The House tried to give seniors and others a chance for a price break on the cost of medicines they need to stay healthy. The bill would have brought down the cost of drugs by purchasing them from Canada at savings of up to 80 percent and would have created a website to help residents easily find medication costs and availability at Canadian pharmacies. Unfortunately, the Senate killed this bill, but I am committed to seeing this legislation pass next year.



Children's Health

Washington's health care system was severely affected by challenges of recent

years, as low-income families, employers of low-wage workers, and the health insurers looked to the state for a lifeline. Because health care costs are such a significant part of the state budget, all citizens, as taxpayers, were affected. Due to cuts in last year's budget, 20,000 children lost out on health coverage.

House Democrats were committed to restoring those cuts this year, and were successful in keeping Medicaid eligibility for kids at 200% of poverty level. We also successfully blocked efforts by the Senate to require co-pays for all participating families, even those far below the federal poverty level.



Supporting Our Homecare Workers

Lawmakers also negotiated a fifty-percent raise for

homecare workers who serve more than 20,000 elderly and vulnerable adults in our state. Homecare workers help these individuals avoid nursing homes, which can cost our state far more than in-home care. Their work is difficult – they provide assistance for daily activities such as bathing, feeding, even moving from one room to another. Yet homecare workers often make less than they would at a restaurant or retailer. It was time to recognize them for the critical care they deliver. Homecare workers deserved this raise and any other support we can give them.

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Addressing Domestic Violence

Last summer the Crystal Brame tragedy opened our eyes to the threat of domestic violence, especially among law enforcement personnel. The reaction to her death prompted concerned citizens to reexamine law enforcement policies when dealing with one of their own accused of spousal abuse.

The Legislature worked together to pass legislation requiring law enforcement agencies to develop a set of guidelines addressing domestic violence, as well as restricting police officers from carrying a weapon in a courtroom when involved in the allegations. The package of legislation also allows victims of domestic violence to terminate rental agreements

without paying additional rent and prohibits landlords from evicting or refusing to rent to them. In addition, the final supplemental budget includes \$2 million for domestic violence shelters. These steps ensure that we remove any barriers preventing victims of domestic violence from escaping the abuse.

Accountability from Government

As always, I continued to push for greater private and public sector accountability and efficiency measures, and advocated for the Washington Quality Award Council. This council recognizes outstanding efforts by the state's industries, businesses, and organizations in setting higher standards of cost-effectiveness and public satisfaction. Recognizing and rewarding excellence by businesses and agencies in Washington results in overall improvements in the state's economy.

For several years now, I have also prime sponsored House Bill 1053 to require independent performance audits of state government. This bill would have created a Citizen Oversight Board to

collaborate with other auditing and review efforts of the state, and eventually grade every service operation the state provides.

The House has passed this bill two years in a row now with an overwhelming majority. Unfortunately, the Senate has killed it or watered it down to the point of having little or no effect. I will however continue to advocate for greater government efficiencies. There are few displays of our good faith to the people of Washington more effective than candid appraisals of our performance. Performance Audits find waste in state government – but just as importantly, it also finds what works so we can build on those improvements in the future.



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